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WASHINGTON

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Whistling Past the Graveyard

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President Reagan is still whistling past the graveyard to keep his courage up. By blaming his troubles in Nicaragua on the Congress and his blunders in Germany on the press, he hasn't controlled the damage but doubled it.

There isn't a politician in Washington or a President of recent memory who hasn't stumbled into the ditch along the road, but few have had the wit to follow the example of the late Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York, who once said, boy, when I make a mistake, "it's a beaut!"

The mistakes in planning the President's trip to Germany for the 40th anniversary of the end of the last world war were at first a lapse of staff work, then an embarrassment he enlarged into an unintended insult by digging himself deeper into the ditch. He doesn't avoid booby traps but shovels them for himself.

Mr. Reagan has never been noted for his study of history or for his sensitivity to the memories and sufferings of the last half-century, so his recent lapses are no surprise or exception. What is more disturbing is his recent resort to deception.

Chancellor Kohl of West Germany was not responsible, as was suggested here, for the failure of the President, on a journey of remembrance, to stop at the most tragic symbol of mass murder of this century. The Chancellor felt obliged to make public that he had proposed a ceremony in memory of the Holocaust.

In his anxiety to get a doubting Congress to vote another \$14 million for the Nicaraguan rebels, Mr. Reagan suggested that the Pope and the President of Colombia approved of his policy. The Vatican and the Colombian President took the unusual step of stating publicly that they opposed a military conclusion to the problem.

Since then, the President has tried to quell the uproar by postponing a confrontation with the Congress on Nicaraguan aid and agreeing to visit the Bergen-Belsen death camp where Jews were sent, while still insisting on laying a wreath at the Bitburg German cemetery, where some members of the Nazi SS extermination squad are buried. So the reconciliation he wanted is still denied.

One of the paradoxes of all this is that the President recently realized that he had to come into the major decisions of his second term with a stronger Cabinet and White House staff than he had in his first.

They have made a shaky start, but despite all the staggering and blundering of recent days, the outlook is now for a steadier control of executive decisions with clearer lines of authority in fewer hands.

Donald Regan, the former Treasury Secretary, will have more responsibility as chief of staff than his predecessor, James Baker. The President won't let Regan be Reagan, but Mr. Regan will be coordinating the work of two new centralized Cabinet councils — one on economic policy, headed by Mr. Baker, and another on domestic policy, headed by Attorney General Meese.

These two councils, along with the National Security Council, will be the main channels for Presidential decisions, with Vice President Bush playing an increasingly important role, as an intimate of Secretary of State Shultz and Robert McFarlane at N.S.C. and Messrs. Baker and Meese on the two new councils.

Nobody can be sure how this new system will work, but the main players seem more pragmatic and congenial with one another, and are likely to diminish the influence of Secretary of Defense Weinberger and C.I.A. Director William Casey, though these are determined and articulate men who are not given to easy compromise.

It could be that this recent flap over two avoidable tangles will tidy things up here and produce a more coherent and thoughtful Administration. The President has always relied heavily on his staff, but in the first term tended to listen more to his friends — Judge Clark at N.S.C., Mike Deaver, his advertising director, and Edwin Meese — now, except for Mr. Meese, all gone or going.

Nothing is harder for a staff, particularly a staff of personal friends, than to say no to a President and oppose his casual approach to foreign affairs, which are sometimes alarmingly foreign to Ronald Reagan.

Much will depend on Pat Buchanan's view and influence in his new job as director of communications in the White House. He will undoubtedly have considerable influence on what the President says and where he goes. Oddly, it is in this field, where the President is supposed to be so good, that he has lately stumbled so badly.

Mr. Buchanan has strong conservative views, but he has been around here for a long time and knows as well as anybody that nothing hurts a President more than getting his facts wrong and pretending he has support where no such support exists. □